Abstract ID : 948

Title : Persistent marine debris and efforts to reduce entanglement of northern fur seals

Category : Conservation

Student :

Preferred Format : Poster Presentation

Abstract : Northern fur seals were listed as depleted in 1988 with no indication of recovery at present. St. Paul and St. George Island populations have exhibited 5 and 30-year decline trends, respectively. Approximately 70-75% of the world population haul out on the Pribilof Islands from May-December. The two islands are also used from May to December as a congregation site for non-breeding males. Recent efforts to remove marine debris have been supported by the NMFS, Alaska Region; USFWS, AMNWR; St. Paul Tribal ECO; Pribilof Islands Stewardship Program; State of Alaska Coastal Impact Assessment Program; LGL Alaska Research Associates, Inc.; Marine Conservation Alliance; and numerous volunteers. In 2003, nearly 60 tons of marine debris was removed from nearshore fur seal habitat on St. Paul Island. Entanglement of fur seals has been studied since the late 1960s, and has been implicated as major cause of mortality in the decline observed in the 1970's and early 1980's. St. Paul Tribal ECO, the Stewardship Program and NMML have continued a study of male fur seal entanglement during subsistence harvests of 1998-2002. Thirteen surveys during July and early August of 2002 counted 3,737 seals, of which 13 (or 0.35%) were entangled. Seven fur seals with scars indicative of previous entanglement were also observed. Entangling debris consisted primarily of trawl net and plastic packing bands. Given the great amount of derelict floating debris it is very likely that many more seals are entangled and do not return to the islands. Continued efforts to capture and disentangle seals as well as removing and preventing persistent debris from entering the marine environment will promote fur seal recovery and conservation.